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ABSTRACT

Top corporate management requires communications departments that maintain credibility with the public by developing the following qualities: integrity established through consistent and honest messages; accuracy based on solid research; authority derived from an understanding of the subject and from drawing on appropriate expertise; a professional style distinguished by clarity, brevity, forcefulness, and organization; and advocacy of the company and its interests. Other obvious requirements include productivity, business sense, and an understanding of the political processes by which public policy is formed. The new, more sophisticated image of top management, as conveyed by members of the Business Roundtable (an organization of business leaders attempting to give business a more active voice in the formation of public policy), offers clues to future expectations regarding corporate communications. These new executives demonstrate that they are well read, up-to-date on current affairs, articulate, open with the press, aware of their public responsibilities, business-centered, action-oriented, pragmatic, and conscious of the need to build a supportive constituency for business. (MAI)

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WHAT TOP MANAGEMENT EXPECTS FROM THE COMMUNICATOR

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To the National Conference of the Industrial Communications Council
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What does top management expect from the communicator?

For starters, let's say, "A day's work for a day's pay."

Beyond that -- it depends on the management.

Most of the people here have more experience than I in communications with employees and other special publics. If I can make any contribution to this meeting, it will derive from the fact that I've been working one-on-one with the Chief Executive Officers of General Electric for about twenty-five years. This involves communications addressed to just about all the publics there are, and always from the point of view of the fellow who is ultimately responsible for the success or failure of the company. It's an exhilarating way to make a living. You're operating out at the edge of the cliff, but it's one of the most rewarding jobs in corporate life -- especially when you're working with a bright, exciting, and articulate man like my current boss, Reg Jones.

I suppose the most direct way to find out what top management expects of the communicator is to ask him -- so I did. I told Reg I was going to make this talk, and asked him what he expects of his communications function.

INTEGRITY

Interestingly, he started out with the word "integrity." He went on to say that a company can't maintain its franchise with the public, or its customers, or its employees, or any other constituency, if it doesn't maintain its credibility. So speaking and writing truthfully and consistently is the first requirement. Different audiences have different interests, and you have to address the active concerns of the audience if you are going to establish mental and emotional contact -- get the front door open, so to speak. But your messages to various audiences have to be consistent with each other, ring true, stand up under comparative examination.

There are successful politicians who seem to defy this principle. They can shift positions with all the speed and agility of a belly dancer, and we have to acknowledge a thing of beauty when we see it. It was said of Mr. Carter himself, when he was running for President, that he had more positions than a sex manual.

But evidently the people detected a center of integrity beneath the apparent contradictions. This has to do with character, and the communicator tries first to express the character of the company.

In corporate communications, we often have to deal with paradoxes: for example, the need to lay off people in a recession, even while we are concerned about them, is a common experience. It's easy to maintain the support of our constituencies when we have good news to work with. The communicator's real test comes when he's got to deliver bad news. That's when a reputation for integrity and concern, built up over the years, is an invaluable asset.

ACCURACY

The second expectation that Reg Jones brought up was accuracy. He's a bear on this subject, again because it is so important to credibility. The man who has hard data to back up his viewpoints has a big advantage; but if the data turns out to be wrong, he's in deep yogurt. Since the executive doesn't have time to check out every number or statement personally, he must rely on the communicator to do the solid research necessary to be sure that facts are accurately stated, that apples are not being compared with oranges, and that statistics are not being used to deceive.

DRAWING ON EXPERTISE

This relates to Reg's third point: don't try to noodle out the whole message yourself. Draw on all the expertise you can. It's a corporate statement, not yours, so stubborn pride of authorship is out of place. Then make the extra effort to understand the subject, so that you can write with authority and originality. This is the difference between a good writer and a human Xerox machine. And even though it's a painful process, check out your drafts with the experts and the managers who will be affected. Many a corporate message comes out more like a negotiated treaty than a work of art, but the more the communicator takes the trouble to understand the subject, the better his chances of writing a clean and forceful message.

STYLE

At this point, Mr. Jones moved to matters of style. He himself is a very articulate man, capable of improvising very moving speeches from notes on the back of an envelope. But when he's going on the record, and wants a written script or statement, he expects it to be researched, organized, and written in a thoroughly professional manner.

As a speaker who is highly sensitive to audience response, he especially values clarity, forcefulness, and brevity. As he says, "Verbosity kills."

There is nothing worse than watching eyes glaze over when the speaker drifts into a dead passage. People cough. Chairs start squeaking. The beautiful breathless silence that happens when an audience is spellbound suddenly shatters, and it's extremely difficult to recover.

If you're writing for print, you don't have that same ruthless test, but people can turn pages, you know. Your writing can be ignored if it's not interesting. Or if your language is not tuned to the vocabulary of the audience. Or if the message isn't going anywhere.

Most of the managers we deal with are articulate people, but they are not professionals in communications. They use the same alphabet, the same dictionary -- but when they put it down on paper, it just lies there. It doesn't have the energy to incite action. It takes persons with certain intellectual, literary, and aesthetic gifts to take that same message and make it work. Language lifted to the level of power: that's what the communicator is expected to deliver.

ADVOCACY

Finally, Mr. Jones suggested that we remember why we're on the payroll. We are hired as advocates of the company and its interests. Not reporters, not teachers, not preachers, not the conscience of the corporation, though a lively conscience is as essential in this profession as in any other.

We are part of an organization, expressing its corporate viewpoint, advocating its interests as a lawyer advocates the interests of his clients.

For some people, this seems to create a problem. But for those who enjoy advocacy -- a special skill -- and take pride in helping an organization build productive relationships with society, this is a satisfying use of talents. After all, the interests of any company are best served when they also advance the interests of the public. And companies that fall out of step with society are, over time, headed downhill. So -- if you've found a reasonably good company (and no human organization is perfect, but some are better than others) then get involved, commit yourself to full membership, and you'll find ways to advance your own standards within the context of the larger community.

Those are the main points that Reg Jones made. He expects integrity, accuracy, thorough research, professional writing skills, and vigorous advocacy of the company's interests, in the context of the public interest.

Besides these explicit expectations, there are also a number of implicit assumptions -- things that are so obvious he evidently takes them for granted.

PRODUCTIVITY

Productivity, for example. The points we've discussed so far are related to quality, but a professional communicator is also expected to produce in quantity. We all would like more time to study the subject matter, more time to edit, more time to polish. But in the real world, there are deadlines to meet; and a fellow who can't meet them, without fail, is violating one of his fundamental commitments. Working for Mr. Jones, I turn out about 50 speeches and papers a year. Many of you, I'm sure, have even more pressing schedules. The clock is always ticking, and many a weekend is spent at the typewriter, but top management expects the deadlines to be met without any sacrifice of quality.

BUSINESS SENSE

Another expectation -- and this is not as often fulfilled -- is business sense. Respect for the bottom line. Understanding of the business world. For liberal arts people, this may come hard. We've all had writers working for us who have marvelous language skills, but just don't have a feel for business and economics. And no amount of language skill can disguise a certain emptiness, a feeling that something is being lost in the translation,

in the work of a corporate communicator who hasn't learned to feel at home with finance, economics, technology, and -- today -- politics.

UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES

That too is becoming an expectation of top management: that the communicator will have an understanding of the political processes by which public policy is formed. The U. S. economy is being politicized. The power of decision is being moved from the Board Room to Washington, D. C., and the most intractable problems facing management today are usually external to the company. Therefore corporate management has had to become involved in the formation of public policy. And inevitably, the communications channels to various corporate constituencies -- employees, customers, share owners, community neighbors, the media, and so on -- are being employed to build support for the views of management on issues of importance to business. It's the task of corporate communicators to understand those issues and present them in terms that have meaning to the audiences addressed.

Thus far, I've tried to suggest some of the expectations of top management on the basis of some explicit comments by one prominent CEO, plus some of the implicit assumptions that one encounters in corporate communications work. Another approach might be to look at the

Chief Executive Officers themselves, particularly the new activists who take their public policy responsibilities seriously. What are they like? How do they think and act?

For this part of the talk, I'll put on my Business Roundtable hat. My work as Chairman of the Roundtable's Public Information Committee brings me into frequent contact with the CEO's in the Roundtable, particularly those in its Policy Committee.

BUSINESS ROUNDTABLE

Most of you are familiar with The Business Roundtable. It's an organization of about 190 leading companies from a wide range of industries and geographical locations. Its purpose is to give the business community a more effective voice in the formation of public policy. And its principal strength is the personal involvement and participation of the Chief Executive Officers of the member firms.

Working in Task Forces on specific issues, they utilize their corporate staffs to do research, prepare position papers, recommend policy, and speak out publicly on the issues. While the companies' Washington representatives are important in keeping the member firms up-to-date on legislative developments and do lobbying to help win support for Roundtable positions, the distinctive feature of the Roundtable is the activity of the

Chief Executives themselves. They spend a lot of time in Washington explaining their views to key Committee members in the Senate and House, and visiting with White House Staff and Cabinet members -- often at the direct invitation of the government officials, who are sincerely interested in getting business viewpoints and information.

I don't intend to take your time with a discussion of the Roundtable, but it might be worthwhile to comment on the CEO activists themselves -- the new breed who are rising to the top in the larger corporations today. If we in corporate communications are to provide the kind of staff support they need, and achieve the levels of mutual trust and respect that make for a productive relationship, we will have to consider the way they think and act. There may be some clues here as to the capabilities that they will expect of us.

No two of them are really alike, but for what it's worth, here are some of the salient characteristics of the CEO's who are setting the patterns for the future.

THE CEO ACTIVISTS

1. They seem to be broader people, intellectually, than most of their predecessors. Practically all of them are up-to-date on current affairs, and many of them also are well read, acquainted with history, literature,

philosophy, sociology, and the arts. When you work with a Reg Jones or a Walter Wriston or a Fletcher Byrom, you know you are in the presence of powerful intellectual equipment.

2. Most of them are articulate communicators -- able to organize material, make persuasive arguments, improvise in a tough spot, and handle themselves well in small groups. Some are also sterling performers with an audience, and even on television. As you know, for some this is a natural gift, but many companies are hiring coaches to upgrade their executives' onstage abilities.

3. They are more open and forthcoming, less secretive in dealing with the press. John deButts of AT & T has made some great talks on this subject, and practices what he preaches. He says, "We must adopt a sufficient openness to public inquiry -- and a sufficient readiness to respond to public challenges -- to make it clear that what we once might have been disposed to call 'our' business is in fact the public's business ...."

4. The new CEO's are very sensitive to public opinion and conscious of their public franchise. And being numbers-oriented, they follow the polls. Sometimes they seem to overreact to criticism, and the pollsters are not above pouring it on when they have some negative findings with which to justify another round of surveys. Nevertheless,

there is this deep interest in public attitudes, and a desire to do something about it -- not only to communicate "our side of the story," but also to re-examine company policy and change it where necessary. We in General Electric felt that we got caught in the media mixmaster in that ruckus over PCB's in the Hudson River, but it also triggered a very thorough review and improvement of our environmental control procedures.

5. The new CEO's are more likely to think as stewards than as owners. They are very much aware of being stewards for the investors' assets, but they also feel responsible for the economic well-being of employees, and recognize that -- at least in the larger corporations -- they are also stewards for the productive assets of society. Irving Shapiro of DuPont has been especially eloquent on these responsibilities to the larger aspirations of society, and it's not just rhetoric.

6. I should quickly add that these are business-centered people. They have to be, to make it to the top. Their interests cluster around the economic issues, or the economic aspect of social issues. They are as noble as the next man about good causes, but the bottom line, the survival of the enterprise, is still central to their thinking about the political and social environment.

7. They are action-oriented in public affairs. There is much talk and some effort to anticipate issues at the academic stage, but that's staffwork. The executive adrenalin really starts flowing when an issue hits the Congress. About 90% of the content of the Policy Committee Meetings of The Business Roundtable is devoted to current legislative strategy.

8. The new CEO's are pragmatic about their relationships with government. Power is where you find it. Everybody has ideological preferences, and to a man these people are committed to private enterprise and the market economy. But like Congressmen, they recognize that there are two sides to the aisle, and since it takes votes to get any legislation passed, they tell their story and look for support wherever they can get it, with emphasis on the people who currently hold the levers of power. Naturally, the strongest connections of mutual support are developed with legislators and administrators who have a consistent sympathy for the business system; but sometimes it's necessary to find common ground with opponents, too. In other words, in politics the CEO finally learns that it's necessary to operate by the political rules of the game.

9. The new CEO's are increasingly conscious of the need to build a supportive constituency for business -- not only in Washington,

but in academia, in the media, among employees and investors, and even in the labor movement. This doesn't just happen. A constituency must be cultivated by the political methods of raising issues, proposing solutions, and building support for them.

10. The new CEO's do their homework. There may be some who still think they can "wing it" with conversation when they go to Washington, but they are quickly outclassed by the people who have had good staffwork done before they came, and marinated in the data. This is a Reg Jones specialty, by the way. He not only asks for staff analysis of any issue he is going to discuss in Washington, but also participates in laying out the lines of research and makes decisions, based on preliminary findings, as to the strategy and the program he wants to propose. This thorough-going preparation means he can document virtually every point he makes with facts and figures, frequently in greater depth than the government staffs. It also means he is a welcome visitor in Washington because he is bringing useful and specific information that a Cabinet member or a legislator can use in arriving at his own decisions.

And finally (number 11) the CEO's I've met do not regard this work as "corporate social responsibility," They regard it as an essential and pervasive aspect of managing the corporation. In our company we call it "managing the externalities" -- which may be a bit overstated,

because the externalities also manage us. But that term helps our up-and-coming managers understand that a passive stance toward the external environment is no longer acceptable. These factors require management attention no less than the traditional internal factors of business.

WANTED: SOPHISTICATION

If these are the characteristics of the new-style Chief Executives -- and you may argue that these are the exceptions, but I'll bet you that the exceptions are becoming the rule -- then it's clear that the demands on corporate communicators are going to be much more challenging than in the past. The new top management, more sophisticated intellectually and politically, more sensitive socially, will expect similar sophistication from professional communicators. The new CEO's are willing to do their homework, study the issues, and understand the forces that are shaping the modern world. And fortunately, they want us to help.

I can't think of anything more exciting -- more fun -- than working in that kind of environment.